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SACRED JOURNEY



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and service to others,

and to help bring about

a deeper spirit of unity

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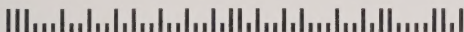
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Epiphany

Janet M. Haag



What is it about a rainbow that captures our attention? For scientists, a rainbow is a refraction of the sun's rays as seen through drops of rain. To the artist, it is a full spectrum of color painted across the sky. Skeptics view a rainbow as a suitable analogy for an illusory goal. And mystics and poets have long laid claim to it as a sign of hope, a symbol of God's benevolent presence. One way or another, a rainbow is not to be ignored; it is universally compelling. In both appearance and meaning, it is a celebration of diversity that invites us to pause and look, and look again. This unexpected and fleeting gift of nature reminds us there is beauty in paradox, and differences can enrich rather than diminish. A rainbow lures us beyond our own "take-it-for-granted" way of being in and about the world.

Prayer and other forms of spiritual practice—can similarly nudge us beyond limited perceptions and narrow definitions to new ways of seeing and being present. C. S. Lewis has wisely noted, "Prayer does not change God; prayer changes us." Prayer fosters openness, making room for spiritual gifts of faith, hope, compassion, equanimity—cherished by religious traditions around the

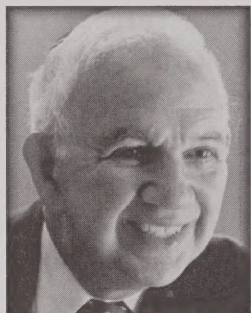
globe. His Holiness the 14th Dali Lama says, “I believe that it is much better to have a variety of religions, a variety of philosophies, rather than one single religion or philosophy. Each religion has certain unique ideas or techniques and learning about them can only enrich one’s own faith.” Nowhere was this more evident than during a recent multi-faith prayer service at a retreat for peacemakers. Representatives from nine distinct traditions offered readings, prayers, chants and reflections on peace—nuances that suggested universal peace is not to be attained in sameness. The promise of peace is to be fulfilled in mutual respect and appreciation.

Rabbi Harold Kushner and the other writers featured in this issue of Sacred Journey call us to a prayer of openness and receptivity, in which our bodies, minds and spirits embrace what is being given and acknowledge there is radical goodness in divine mystery. The rainbow’s arc spans the distance between two indistinct points of origin and destination. Whatever your own tradition, as you continue to make your way along your spiritual journey, may your prayer lead you to delight in the epiphany of a rainbow!

COMPANIONS ON THE JOURNEY

An Interview with

Harold Kushner



Harold S. Kushner is Rabbi Laureate of Temple Israel in Natick, MA, having served the congregation for 30 years. He holds six honorary doctorates, has been honored by The Christophers, a Roman Catholic organization devoted to spreading messages of hope and understanding, as one of the fifty people who have made the world a

better place in the last half century and has been recognized as clergyman of the year by Religion in American Life.

Fellowship in Prayer: In your highly acclaimed book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, you offer profound wisdom about how a good and just God can allow suffering and tragedy in life. Can you share how your insight in this regard has changed the way in which you pray when you confront a very difficult or painful situation today?

Rabbi Kushner: The path I have followed is a well trodden one, worn down by great spiritual leaders who have gone before me. The wisdom I put forth echoes the 23rd Psalm, *The Lord Is My Shepherd*, as well as verse 5 of the 30th Psalm that reads, "Weeping may linger for the night; but joy comes with the morning." In both of these I find a memoir of a man who has everything going well for him for most of his life and attributes his good

fortune to God. His attitude seems to be: I am good, honest, just, and pious, and therefore God rewards me, both as an acknowledgment of my good behavior and as an inducement to model this behavior for others. Then, something terrible happens and the man finds himself in the valley of the shadow of death and this is when he really discovers God and what God is really like. This is not a God who assures happy endings, but a God who does not desert us even when everything is pulled out from under us. I believe this account describes exactly what happened to me. Until the age of 28 or so, my life was charmed. Everything was working well. Then, my wife and I found out that our infant son had a very rare disease, one that would ultimately cost him his life while he was still very young. With this news, my world collapsed; my faith collapsed; and I couldn't help but say to myself and others, "This is not the way I was taught the world should work." I didn't know what to do. I was on the verge of completely losing faith in God and concluding that the goodness of life was a fraud. Then, reading a sermon that Archibald McLeish once gave made the difference for me. McLeish doesn't say this explicitly but he implies that God doesn't control everything. God doesn't control and suspend laws of nature and God doesn't make sure that human beings do only what God wants them to do. Once I realized that God was a God of love and not a God of total power, everything fell into place. Now when I pray to God, I don't bargain, I don't ask, "What can I do for you, God, so that you'll do this for me." I don't try to persuade God that I deserve to be given whatever it is I need or want. All I say is, "God, this is a time when I need you. I just need to know I am not alone." This sort of prayer never fails me.

It is certainly easy to fall into bargaining when we pray, especially when the chips are down. It is a very real human experience.

True! There are no atheists in fox holes. The trouble is that when we operate from a position of bargaining with God, I'll bet that one in forty times we actually get what we pray for—maybe only one in ten. The other times, the times when we don't, that's when we become skeptics or atheists. And it is not God's fault!

When
innocent
people suffer,
the problem
is not that
they will stop
believing in
God...

Your book certainly holds universal appeal. What do you think enables people of all faiths to embrace your message and your wisdom?

I think human nature is human nature. Whatever denominational family you were born into, whatever church you attend doesn't change human nature. There is a level at which we transcend all of these labels and our experiences are the same. The gratitude we feel when things are going well, the awe and wonder we feel in looking at God's beautiful world, and the sense of abandonment we feel when things collapse, these realities strike people, irrespective of their religious affiliations. Our responses to them are human responses. I believe this is why even today my book reverberates beyond Judeo-Christian culture. My wife and I were vacationing in Thailand a few years ago and I met a woman from a devout Buddhist family.

Her husband had died of cancer and left her with two young children. She did all the things that Buddhists are supposed to do, expressing gratitude that the drop of water had returned to the ocean, that her husband had completed his journey through this veil of suffering. This didn't work for her. She was still angry. A friend, who knew this woman read English, gave her a copy of my book and it worked for her. She said after reading it she felt better because she realized that what had happened to her, hadn't happened because she had somehow deserved it. There are certainly times in our lives, no matter what our faith traditions, when we need to be reassured that we are not experiencing what we are experiencing because we deserve to suffer.

I recently read a wonderful statement by C.S. Lewis, written in the aftermath of his wife's death. He said, "When innocent people suffer, the problem is not that they will stop believing in God, the problem is that they will continue to believe in God, but they will believe terrible things about God. They will believe in a God who is a monster, who takes children away from loving parents or takes parents away from children who need them." This is really what I am trying to convince people not to do. I am bringing a very welcome message that God did not do whatever awful thing has happened to them. God is, quite simply, a God of love.

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God, but they
will believe
terrible things
about God.

~ C.S. Lewis

Do you think severe adversity brings out the best, or paradoxically, the worst in people?

I think it brings out both—depending on how a person responds and what resources one has. One of the most useful things I have done is to introduce people to Victor Frankel and his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*. The great truth that Frankel elucidates in his book is that you can't control what the world does to you; you can only control how you will respond to it. The tragedies that happen to us of themselves don't necessarily have meaning. I reject the notion that God sends us suffering so that we will become more charitable, or wiser, or so that we will realize what really counts. I don't want to believe that God sends the suffering. I think suffering happens and then, we have the immense, the incredible power of conferring meaning on that suffering. We can either make it a cause for despair and cynicism, or we can make it the source of renewed insight and compassion. The experience of tragedy can either lead us to self-hate or to a sense of fraternity with suffering people everywhere. This is our point of decision and it is a decision only we can make. We can't decide whether or not tragedy will happen to us. We can only decide how we will respond when it happens to us.

Why do you think people who face life-threatening situations revisit their roots in faith or find God at such times?

Many people find God in life-threatening situations for both good and bad reasons. The bad reason is one we



alluded to earlier—sheer desperation. You may be familiar with the “promise prayer.” It goes something like this, “God I haven’t been very good to this point, but get me out of this, and I promise I’ll change!” I like to compare the two prayers of Jacob to illustrate this. He prayed first as a young man, a frightened teenager running away from home, who bargained with God essentially saying, “God, keep me safe, bring me back okay. Help me prosper and I will kick back 10% of everything I have earned.” It never occurs to him that what he is offering God is already God’s to begin with. Twenty years later, at the same border between Aram and Canaan, a wiser and more mature Jacob offers a very different prayer. He prays, “God, I have nothing to offer you and I have no grounds for claiming anything from you. I can only give you one reason why you should help me, because I need you—because I can’t do this by myself.” I think bargaining with God is illegitimate and unwise because when it doesn’t work out, we lose faith in God—we are either angry at God for not giving us what we want or angry at ourselves for not being more deserving. The secret of why Twelve Step Programs work can be found in that prayer of Jacob when he says, “God, I can’t do this alone. You have got to help me.” I have had scores of people tell me that the most authentic religious experience they ever had was not in the church sanctuary on Sunday morning, but in the church basement on Tuesday night when they have gone to their AA program. The essence of what the person says there is, “This is something I know is right, but it is too much for me to do alone. God, if you are with me, I think I can do it.”

In light of your thinking about prayer, how you would describe the difference between faith and hope?

This is an interesting question. I think I have the beginnings of an answer in that hope can be very specific. You hope for something and it is very clear. Faith, I think, is more global. It is a commitment that the world is a livable place, a place where one will not be embarrassed by honesty if one is an honest person or if we are taken advantage of, we will retain our integrity. This is a world which is hospitable to goodness. This is the essence of faith.

Like so many Jewish rabbis, you are a wonderful storyteller, do you have a favorite story about prayer?

Yes, stories similar to the following have been told in one way or another in the past, but this one resurfaced in a slightly different context after Hurricane Katrina. There is a man trapped in his house during the hurricane. He has been a pious churchgoer his whole life. He gets down on his knees and prays, "God, this is a very hard time, get me out of this safely." All of a sudden he sees a bright light and he hears a voice within saying, "You are my beloved follower. I will save you." With this reassurance, the man feels wonderful. A short time later, a neighbor knocks on his door and says, "Listen, we are getting out of here before the waters rise, do you want to get in our car and we will all make a run for the border?" The man responds, "I don't need to rely on you. God has promised he will save me." So, the neighbor drives off. A little bit later, as the water is rising, the man has to go to the second

story of his house to stay dry and safe. Another man comes by in a row boat and says, "Hop in—it is only going to get worse." But the first man confidently replies, "I don't need your shaky rowboat out on that water. I have the Word of God to sustain me. God has promised he will save me." So the man rows off in his rowboat and the waters continue to rise. The man climbs up on the roof of his house. A helicopter flies overhead and a rescuer drops a ladder, shouting, "Climb up, this is your last chance." The man shouts over the roar of the motors, "I don't need your ladder or your helicopter; I rely on the promise of God." So, the helicopter flies off and the waters rise even higher, sweeping the man away. As the man is about to drown, he cries out, "God, you promised you would save me, why didn't you do anything?" God responds, "What do you mean 'why didn't I do anything?' I sent you a car, a boat, and a helicopter."

People often refer to the "power of prayer," what would you say that power is?

The essence of prayer as I understand it is the cure for feeling alone. Martin Buber once said, "Jews don't pray to God for anything. Jews pray to God for God." For example, when I pray with a person who is in the hospital, I explain that we not just praying for a miracle cure or a good outcome to surgery. We are praying for the presence of God. I don't want patients to feel abandoned. I don't want them to feel they are sick because God isn't taking care of them. I don't want them to think God has written them off. I want patients to know God is sending doctors, nurses, and researchers to help them with their illness. God is sending friends to sit with them and pray with them. I don't want them ever to feel alone. To me, presence is the essence of

prayer. This is what I have in mind when I pray. I don't pray for specifics. I don't pray to win the lottery and I don't pray for good fortune or for good health. I simply and openly pray for the presence of God because I am a different person when I feel I am in the presence of God. I behave differently. I stand straighter, I am more circumspect. I am braver. This is all I ask for in prayer. A recent survey tangentially supports what I am talking about. Do you recall a hospital survey in which they divided post-surgical patients into two groups, some of them were prayed for and some were not? Well, the bottom line is that whether the patients were prayed for or not didn't seem to make any difference. A CNN reporter who interviewed me asked, "Well, how do you feel about the fact that praying for someone to recover apparently doesn't have any effect on them?" I responded, "I think this is the best thing that has happened to God in centuries. Perhaps now, people won't have a reason to be angry at God if they pray for their loved one to get better and the person dies." Honestly, God's job is not to make sick people healthy. That is the doctor's job. God's job is to make sick people brave.

To me,
presence is
the essence
of prayer.

I remember reading Larry Dossey's book *The Extraordinary Healing Power of Ordinary Things*. It is clear to me that if a person knows he or she is being prayed for, it will make a difference. However, the explanation of "distance prayer" starts out with the brave assertion that it works, and by the time you read the small print, it turns out that maybe it works or maybe it doesn't—it's not clear or it depends. So, I am

skeptical. I would rather not believe this kind of prayer works, because if I believe it should work, then any time I pray for someone and the person dies, I will feel that either there is something wrong with my prayers or there is something wrong with God.

Do you think praying to God with only the belief and trust that God will see us through difficulty is liberating?

Yes, but I realize it also disappoints a lot of people to hear what I am saying about prayer. There are many of us who would like to think that if we give enough money to charity, we can buy our way out of anything or that if we pray long enough or hard enough about something, we can make it happen. I tell people that we have a problem with prayer in this country because we confuse God with Santa Claus. There are several ways we can answer the person who asks, "Why didn't I get what I prayed for?" And most of the answers are problematic, leading to feelings of guilt, anger or hopelessness. You didn't get what you prayed for because you didn't deserve it, you didn't pray hard enough; because God knows what's best for you better than you do; because someone else's prayer for the opposite result was more worthy; because God doesn't hear prayers; or you didn't get what you prayed for because there is no God. If we are not satisfied with any of these answers, but don't want to give up on the idea of prayer, there is one other possibility. We can change our understanding of what it means to pray and what it means for our prayers to be answered.

SPIRITUAL PRACTICE



The Blessing of Having a Soul

The primary metaphor for the soul in Jewish literature is the light of a flame. The sages recommend tenderness when near another soul, lest one's words or actions dim or extinguish the precious gift that defines life. Jewish liturgy teaches that each body serves as a vessel for a pure soul. Its purity is renewable since each day is another pure white page of possibility on which the soul can inscribe its choices. In the Orthodox community of Lubavitch Hasidim, many mystical traditions of Judaism are preserved. Morning prayer includes a spiritual practice of connecting with the presence of the pure soul.

To begin this practice as an individual or with a group, you light five candles to represent the five levels of the soul. You can do this in fact or by simply placing the idea of the lit candles in your imagination. Focusing softly on the flames, you then recite the following phrase from the morning prayer for the soul: *elohai neshamah sheh nah-tah-ta bi te-ho-rah hee*, slowly, over and over again until it becomes a chant. The Hebrew is translated into English, "My God the soul you have placed in me, pure is she."

Information for this article was adapted from Meaning & Mitzvah: Daily Practices for Reclaiming Judaism through Prayer, God, Torah, Hebrew, Mitzvot and Peoplehood by Rabbi Goldie Milgram. www.jewishlights.com



Then, gently reflect on each level of the soul:

Nefesh, the blue core of the flame is the first level of the soul. This is where you sense your soul and body connect, your center of vitality. Imagine where this place of soul and body connection is for you.

Ruah, the yellow band of the flame, is the layer of anger, joy, sadness—your feelings.

Neshamah, the orange band of the flame is another layer of soul: your personality, thoughts memories, opinions and innovations. You are more than your feelings.

Haya, the black farfrizzlings that come off into the air as the flame burns, represent your intuition. This is also the quality of the soul that helps you to stay alive during times when it feels as if you are clawing at the ground with your fingernails to survive, to tolerate the pains of life.

Yehidah, the candle's heat and light is where your soul is unified and undifferentiated from All Being. Who can say where this begins and ends? This is where you occupy space in creation, where you are needed in particular. You contribute uniquely while at the same time you are in *yehidut* (unity) just as the drop of water is with the ocean, as the leaf is with the tree, as the heat and light of the flame are simultaneously part of the original, shining light of creation.

Let a warm silence prevail.

Chant the *elohai neshamah* prayer softly again.

Sometimes, when this flame visualization is done in the context of community, it is possible to sense the flame of each soul in the room expanding, radiating through shining faces and great hearts, far beyond each physical body, a light that comes through each person from the Source of all energy and creation, revealing the menorah of humanity.

ILLUMINATIONS



The day the Lord created hope was probably the same day he created Spring.

~ *Bern Williams*

Thousands of candles can be lit from a single candle, and the life of the candle will never be shortened. Happiness never decreases by being shared.

~ *Buddha*

Hope is faith holding out its hand in the dark.

~ *George Iles*

...just as despair can come to one another only from other human beings, hope, too, can be given to one only by other human beings.

~ *Elie Wiesel*

All I have seen teaches me to trust the Creator for all I have not seen.

~ *Ralph Waldo Emerson*

Everyone has faith in God though everyone does not know it...We may not be God, but we are of God, even as a little drop of water is of the ocean.

~ *Mahatama Gandhi*

Your faith has made you whole.

~ *Matthew 9:22*

Waiting is the hardest work of hope.

~ *Lewis Smedes*

Faith is a gift from God; without it there would be no life.

~ *Mother Teresa*

Hope is what sits by a window and waits for one more dawn, despite the fact that there is not one ounce of proof in tonight's black, black sky that it can possibly come.

~ *Joan Chittister*

Sometimes questions are more important than answers.

~ *Nancy Willard*

There are always flowers for those who want to see them.

~ *Henri Matisse*

One's suffering disappears when one lets oneself go, when one yields—even to sadness.

~ *Antoine de Saint-Exupery*

Faith is the only true and certain good—the consolation of life, the fulfillment of the highest hopes, the progress of a soul which in all things rests assured upon God. It is faith alone which makes our paths secure.

~ *Philo*

Our life is grounded in faith, with hope and love besides.

~ *Julian of Norwich*

Belief is truth held in the mind; faith is a fire in the soul.

~ *Joseph Fort Newton*

Bothering God

Barbara Brown Taylor



I have a seven-year-old granddaughter, by marriage, named Madeline. She is blond, skinny and tall for her age. When she comes to visit, we cook together. Our most successful dishes to date have been mashed sweet potatoes with lots of butter and crescent dinner rolls made from scratch. From the day Madeline was born, we have been able to look each other straight in the eye with no sentimentality whatsoever. The tartness of our love for one another continues to surprise me. It is easy to forget she is seven years old.

My first indication that there might be gaps in her religious education came several years ago when her mother, her grandfather and I joined hands around the dinner table and bowed our heads to pray. "Why is granddaddy talking with his eyes shut?" Madeline asked. "Just be quiet and listen," her mother said, which was not a bad introduction to prayer.

An Episcopal priest since 1985, Barbara Brown Taylor traded her church for the classroom, and now teaches religion at Piedmont College in rural northeast Georgia. She has lectured at Yale, Princeton, and Duke, as well as churches across the country. She is the author of several books. Reprinted with permission from The Christian Century © 1999. www.christiancentury.org

Last May when she came to celebrate her birthday, it was just the four of us again. Dressed in her favorite blue bell-bottoms, Madeline watched the candles on her cake burn down while we sang to her. Then she leaned over to blow them out without making a wish.

"Aren't you going to make a wish?" her mother asked.

"You have to make a wish," her grandfather said. Madeline looked as if someone had just run over her cat.

"I don't know why I keep doing this," she said to no one in particular.

"Doing what?" I asked.

"This wishing thing," she said, looking at the empty chair at the table. "Last year I wished my best friend wouldn't move away but she did. This year I want to wish that my mommy and daddy would get back together ..."

"That's not going to happen," her mother said, "so don't waste your wish on that."

"I know it's not going to happen," Madeline said, "so why do I keep doing this?" No one answered her. It would have been insulting under the circumstances, since her question was better than any response we could have given her. Why do any of us keep wishing for things we know won't happen? Why do we keep tossing the coins of our hearts' desires into pools of still water that swallow them up without a sound?

If I had been prepared, I might have said something inspired about the difference between wishing and prayer, but I was not prepared. When I talk to Madeline about prayer, I want to make sure I tell her the truth about what she can expect. I want to say something she can test for herself, about how God loves her and listens to her, but in that case I will need a ready explanation for why it does not always seem so.

I think I will skip the usual stuff about how “no” is a valid answer to prayer. As true as that may, be, it sounds stingy to me. Even Jesus thought it sounded stingy. “Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone?” (Matt. 7:9). I also think I will stay away from the stuff about how she should only ask for what accords with God’s will. “Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ and if you do not doubt in your heart, but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you” (Mark 11:23). Surely there are prayer requests more central to God’s will than rearranging the landscape.

What I want Madeline to know is that the best thing about prayer is the relationship itself. Whether or not she gets what she asks for, I want her to keep asking. I want her to pester God the same way she pesters her mother, thinking of 12 different ways to plead her case. I want her to long for God the same way she longs for her father, holding fast to him even when his chair is empty.

When she complains that none of this does any good, I am going to ask her to tell me the difference between how she feels while she is praying versus how she feels when she thinks about giving up. If I am lucky, she is going to tell me that she feels more alive when she is praying, and that is when I will tell her the story about the persistent widow—that loud-mouthed woman who bothered the unjust judge until he gave her what she wanted. “And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night?” Jesus asks his disciples at the end of that story. “Will he delay long in helping them?” (Luke 18:7).

Well, yes, he might. I am willing to concede that much. But there is more to prayer than the answer to prayer.

There is also the pray-er, who is shaped by the praying. What the persistent widow knows is that the most important time to pray is when your prayers seem meaningless. If you do not go and yell under the judge's window, what are you going to do? Take to your bed with a box of Kleenex? Forget what matters to you altogether? No. Every day of your life, you are going to get up, wash your face, and go ask for what you want. You are going to trust the process, regardless of what comes of it, because the process itself gives you life.

One day, when Madeline asks me outright whether prayer really works, I am going to say, "Oh, sweetie, of course it does. It keeps our hearts chasing after God's heart. It's how we bother God, and how God bothers us back. There's nothing that works any better than that."

PRAYERS



Soulsapes

I catch my breath with you,
And then I breathe with you.
Long, slowly, deeply
I breathe you in.
Your life runs through me;
Runs along my veins like
 lightning
Your peace rises in my soul
 like a burgeoning tide.
You give me seeds
 to plant
And fruits to carry
 in baskets
Out into the day.

~ Jane Higgins

Sister Jane Higgins, RSM has served as a high school principal, English teacher, hospital chaplain, speaker and retreat director. She resides in Rhode Island.



3A.M.

Is it the sound of your voice that causes me to stir;
Beckoning to me softly while I sleep?
Gently, insistently calling me forth from my dreams.

~ Jennifer Johnson

Solitude

That's all You wanted me to do. Sit with You.
I reminisced how only Your love has ever truly moved me.
Forgiven me endlessly. Outstretched Your hands to me
the moment I go within and call Your name
Your holy name. Your name that is a prayer.
Your name that lights the darkened rooms of my
mind and heart.
I am known by my Beloved.
I can hide nothing, though at times I foolishly try.
You are my life, my love. You are friendship beyond
anything I've known.
You want me united with Your endlessly loving heart.
You want to shower graces upon me.
Yes, Lord, I will sit with You.

~ Wendy S. Messier

Jennifer Johnson is a graphic designer living in Sherwood, AK with her husband and daughter.

Wendy Messier resides in New Jersey. She enjoys photography, calligraphy, inspirational writing, and traveling to sacred sites.

The Prayer of Tears

Lord, beloved God,
since all communion with you is prayer,
may even my tears be psalms of petition
and canticles of praise to you.
This is a prayer that you value greatly:
the prayer of my tears;
it is a prayer that you always hear
for you are a compassionate and kind God.
And, Lord, I know you understand
that when I am overcome by my tears—
unable to speak or form a prayer—
that these very tears voice volumes of verse.
All truly great prayer
rises from deep inside
and springs spontaneously to the surface.
It would then seem
that from among the many beautiful prayers,
the sacred songs and canticles of praise,
my tears may be the best worship of all.
Help me not to be ashamed of them;
show me how I can let go of control
and let this prayer of my heart, my tears,
flow naturally and freely to you,
my blessed Lord and divine Lover.
In times of joy or sorrow,
blessed be my tears,
the holy prayers of my heart.
Amen.

~ Edward Hays
Pray All Ways

Jim: One Couple's Journey Toward Hope

Linda Lee Albert



My husband, Jim, had no intention of retiring. He was never a man who longed to replace his office for the golf course—who pictured himself leaving his native Michigan for warmer climates. He was a man who considered it a worthy challenge to maneuver his car without mishap in the kind of lake-effect snow and ice for which we were famous, and who never looked out the window during our very long winters and fretted over the gloom and absence of sun for which we were also well known.

For the first seven years after his diagnosis of Parkinson's disease at the age of 58, Jim barely turned a hair. He had climbed to a successful enough place in life to satisfy himself; found a comfortable plateau in his profession, managing a small stable of real estate holdings he had developed; and was content to stay there for the rest of his life. Then one day, things changed. He felt stiff

Linda Lee Albert is a corporate trainer and personal communication life coach with a Master Certification in Neuro-Linguistics. Linda's work has appeared in many journals, including McCall's Magazine and The Wall Street Journal. She resides in Florida with her husband, Jim.

and lethargic in a way he had not previously experienced. His optimism was suddenly no longer in evidence. His belief in his ability to make good decisions disappeared. Trips to his neurologist did nothing to reassure him, even though the doctor was convinced there was no particular change for the worse in the progression of his disease. We were bewildered, and Jim was beginning to be frightened.

Fortunately, our son-in-law, Andy, a clinical social worker, took it upon himself to do a search for us on the internet. According to what he found, 50% of Parkinson's patients are fated to undergo a clinical depression at some point in the course of their illness, with the symptoms imitating the Parkinson's symptoms themselves, so that a diagnosis of depression is very difficult to determine. No fault or failing on the part of the person suffering through this is to blame—not even the pain and disappointment of having to deal with a progressive physical disease—but rather, the compromised brain chemistry itself is both the primary cause and the potential remedy.

Neither my husband's internist nor neurologist had alerted us to this possibility; but, once armed with information, we were ultimately able to find a neuropsychiatrist who aided us in understanding what my husband was going through. He reassured us that Jim could be helped. The doctor prescribed an anti-depressant to give my husband what he called "a floor" on which to stand emotionally. He encouraged him to get back into living his life as fully as possible.

But there were challenges. Jim had retired abruptly from his work, leaving his longtime trusted assistant to carry on in his behalf until we could figure out how to sell our investments and close down the business. I

was left to handle our personal affairs in order to save him from stress. Jim no longer went to the office, and with no retirement plan in place, life appeared to be over as far as he was concerned. He spent long days sitting around the house in his bathrobe. I would try to perk him up by encouraging him to think of what still lay ahead for us—some of our children yet to marry—weddings to plan or attend—grandchildren to look forward to—new places to explore. This only appeared to make him feel worse, hopeless, and ashamed of his inability to improve his spirits.

While I was taking a course for Spiritual Directors, I learned that in the Catholic tradition hope is not considered something you can force into being through your own willpower, rather it is a gift from God that comes through Grace. I was stunned to hear this. Having grown up with the notion that “God helps those who help themselves,” I had always been a strong believer in action, in the idea that we have to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps in order for anything worthwhile to happen. However, things were not good at home despite our best efforts and I was willing to consider any idea that might be helpful. Sometimes the best gifts come from unexpected places when our backs are against the wall.

I realized if it were true that we humans cannot actually *will* hope, then my efforts to persuade Jim to feel more hopeful were clearly failing for good reason. They were undoubtedly exacerbating the pressure he felt to find his way when the path he planned to be on had clearly closed down on him. I returned home, told him about what I had learned that day in class, and apologized.

If hope could only come as a gift, then there was nothing my husband could do to be hopeful when hope

had disappeared. There was no point in his wasting energy beating himself up about his lack of success in trying to do the impossible. It was hard enough to be without hope. What he could do instead, what was still within his power, was to begin to hope for hope. It was a gentle recognition and doable.

In fact, it was something the two of us could do together. This marked a turning point in our lives; the start of a remarkable journey that has led us to Florida—to a beautiful condominium overlooking a beautiful bay, to warmth and sunlight, and improved health and energy for my husband. These past 10 years have brought all kinds of amazing synchronicities and new possibilities our way, and they have been the sweetest ten years of our nearly 50-year marriage.

What challenges the future will bring, we do not yet know. Nor can we control that future as much as we might like to. But it is a gift to know that good things can often come out of bad, that surprises and adventures of the best sort may be around a dark and frightening corner, and that even when things seem hopeless, we can always hope for hope.

P O E T R Y



Magid

"O angels...servants of the Supreme..."

~ Artscroll Siddur

Dreams seemed
Beyond my control
When a rainbow
Appeared from a
Place without limits
And as the veil between
The worlds part, the
Eternal revealed as
Brilliant as a thousand
Suns gracefully swaying
Like a tender branch,
Repeating chants that
Muted the voice of sin
Over the *City of Gold* where
Kings and prophets are a
Memory of ancient glory
~ Michal Mahgerefteh

Magid means teacher sent from God.

Michal Mahgerefteh was born in Israel and nows resided in the US. She is the publisher and editor of Poetica Magazine, Reflections of Jewish Thought. Her first poetry collection, Red Thread Around My Wrist is scheduled for release in late 2008.

Awaken

As the years pass dreams begin to fade
Childhood imagination dulls with daily routine
Individuality is compromised with norms
Becoming assimilated with society.

Take time to quiet the mind and remember to dream
Feel the energy greater than yourself overwhelm your being
See the colors as brightly as they were meant to be seen
Breathe in the life that left you so long ago.

Reach out for the hand that has been waiting for your grasp
Touch life for the first time again with all your heart
We waste so many days not seeing what is already there
The spiritual enlightenment that awakens our soul.

~ Kelly Cassidy

Healing

To give utterance to grief,
the obdurate heaviness of it,
dislodges barriers to the heart's bower,
tugs and pulls that sorrow
into the Light,
urges yielding to an
all-encompassing grace.

~ Sandra H. Bounds

Kelly Cassidy is a poet and aspiring writer who lives in DE with her dog, Karma. She has spent over ten years focusing on spiritual enlightenment.

Sandra Bounds is an active member of the Mississippi Poetry Society. She has served as an instructor at East Mississippi Community College and several private and public high schools in her hometown of Macon, MS.

Soothsayers & Desert Nights

*You
Longed
For the comfort
Of silence and fulfillment
For a trace of the architect of paradise
The search took you to the heart of every season
To mountain ranges desert nights and cold pavements
The temples appeared empty and widows were all too plenty
Soothsayers came and went like shooting stars
Yet you still did not know love
And that i am who you are
You did not see me
In the mirror*

silent lotus

*A long-time friend and frequent contributor to Sacred Journey, Silent Lotus is a spiritual advisor, artist and poet. He resides in Europe and the United States.
www.silentlotus.net*

Spring's Message to Winter

Alice O. Howell



A goodly time ago when I was just flirting with middle age, I found myself marooned in a depressing late winter. I was living in a flat over a garage on an estate in Long Island, newly single after a painful divorce following years of a tyrannical relationship. Additionally, the job I loved was terminating.



I longed for an unattainable love, a fairly classic situation, I now realize. I wrote him letters and left them to be picked up by the postman. The mailbox was a long walk through trees and bushes. From the house it was impossible to see if the mail had come.

On one particularly cold and grey morning I noticed some little snowdrops just emerging from the ground at the corner of the garage. But by the time I came home from work it began to snow again, and when it stopped there were three feet of snow piled up everywhere. The blizzard had paralyzed the entire

Alice O. Howell is an eccentric 85 year-old living in the Berkshires of New England. She is the author of eight books, all written after the age of 60. Her second and beloved husband, Walter Anderson, gave her a computer as encouragement.

area. Like the snow drops I felt buried, as locked at home, I wallowed in self-pity and despair.

Two weeks passed. The snow finally melted. My friend telephoned once but no hoped-for letter appeared. Then on an absolutely miserable morning, after I had trekked out twice for the mail and found none, I was walking back to the house when under an apple tree I saw a sodden, brown, wrinkled, old apple lying on the ground. It looked exactly the way I felt. So, I took my boot-covered right foot and deliberately, petulantly smashed it!

When I looked at the resulting mess, I was shocked to see five luminous, black, wet apple pips glaring back at me! They seemed to be shouting as loud as they could, "In the midst of death, there is life! In the midst of despair, there is a future! There is a purpose to all grief—the fruit to come of it is wisdom."

I remember the moment well. I can see myself in my dark blue parka standing and staring in wonder at the pips, amazed by my sudden insight. I bent down and carefully gathered the pips in my mittens and carried them back to the house, only to be greeted by another miracle: the snowdrops had bloomed and seemed to be teasing me. "See, as little as we are, we are stronger than those three feet of snow!"

I carried the pips inside and dropped them in a saucer. Then I went back out, picked three of the tender snowdrops and put them in a tiny vase. I brought them both up to the small altar I had for meditation. I felt both ashamed and filled with gratitude. I shed tears of relief.

In a book I was reading at the time, my experience was affirmed by the alchemist Agrippa von Nettesheim when he wrote:

"Virtutes divinae in res diffusae."

"Divine forces are diffused in things."

A few years later, as I was lecturing around the world I would write this quotation on the board at the very beginning of my talks. My lectures led to my being invited aboard a cruise around the Mediterranean to teach a group of two hundred people anxious to visit sacred sites in Egypt, Israel, Turkey, Greece, Yugoslavia and Rome. Among these passengers was the love of my life, Walter Andersen. With white hair on our heads, we married and spent eighteen wonderful years together. Eight years ago he departed this life ahead of me, leaving me with wonderful memories and a heart overflowing with love and joy.

The snowdrops here in New England bloom early in the spring. As I looked at them the other day, I believe I heard them murmur, "See, we told you so."

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A REFLECTION



Dawn Skyscape

Bill Sloane

The Sun dawned this morning as never before;
As never before have I seen it shine.
It was more than shining,
It was glowing and pulsing:
The light transformed,
If that be possible, gently so.
I cannot find the words to express it.

How does one give form in words
To a light that seems tangible?
My words would have to be intangible!
The light from the Sun of this dawn
Was gently expanding and contracting;
A gossamer globe
Encompassing great rounded distances
Out from the original circular disk,
The central core.
Do you see what I mean?
Can you feel it?

Bill Sloane recently completed a graduate school program to obtain teaching certification for social studies. He reports that he has practiced a number of sacred traditions but is a master of none, and finds writing poetry to be a saving grace.

The usual brilliance of the Sun
Had been muted,
Stepped down in intensity,
So that I felt I could touch this light,
Not simply see its effect.
I could feel the givingness of it:
The gift of the light.
I could see it being offered thus,
Just like one offers a drink of water.

Yesterday, what I saw was just
The disk of the Sun
Rising in the royal throne of the sky,
Its bright disk framed so discretely
By the colors of the morning sky.
That separation was lost now.

I could not see the sky without
Also seeing within it this new light,
Giving substance to the space of the sky,
The gift of a new dawn.
I need a new word for this dawning sky.
What do you suggest?

Always Turn Toward, Never Turn Away

Rigdzin Shikpo



If you asked Trungpa Rinpoche for the essence of the Buddha's teaching, he would say, "It is very simple. It is simply the teaching of openness, complete openness."

Trungpa Rinpoche's approach was simply to be open and to minimize the projections we make on our experience. His great saying was, "Turn towards everything." Even if we don't know what to do, or how to handle a situation, we just turn toward it. What comes to us might be quite painful, but it is always better to turn toward. It is a very simple choice, although it might be a painful choice sometimes. We can either turn toward or we can turn away, and Trungpa Rinpoche said you should *always* turn toward and *never* turn away.

We may find, having turned toward a situation, that we don't know what to do. That might be embarrassing, but it's an interesting kind of embarrassment.

EMPTY HANDED

A martial arts teacher once explained to me that the word *karate* means to have "an empty hand." We don't need

Excerpted from Never Turn Away: the Buddhist Path Beyond Hope and Fear
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what he called a “secret sword;” in fact, we train to give up all such secret swords. From a Buddhist point of view, we all have a number of secret—and maybe not so secret—swords which we use to handle difficult circumstances, when all we really need is to be empty handed, to come nakedly into situations.

We could almost call this the path of embarrassment. Ordinarily, we free ourselves from embarrassment in difficult situations by having some contrived method up our sleeves. But the only method that really helps, in the end, is simply to turn toward and experience things clearly. We have to overcome the embarrassment of not always knowing how to handle ourselves. We have to let go of our habits, projections, and other easy, familiar devices that don’t really work.

We don’t need to be especially brave to practice Dharma. It is more like we reach a situation where there is only one road to take; it’s almost the wisdom of despair. We have tried everything else, so why not try this? If we thought we had another option, we might not try anything so radical. Maybe we are irritated with our ordinary ways of reacting to situations. Perhaps there is a simpler way of dealing with existence, something more radical than simply “handling” things.

This approach is actually more real than radical. There is something very wholesome about turning toward things completely and openly. It is very sharp and uncontrived and feels genuine in a way that our ordinary projections and ways of handling things never do. But we will never know this unless we do the practice, because we will have nothing to compare it to.

By turning toward situations as openly as possible we get the raw data of our experience. This is just the

first stage, but that first stage is crucial, and carries us a long way.

SEEING THINGS AS THEY ARE

The next stage is more at the level of insight. We might discover, for example, that our sense of self is not as solid as we thought. Or, we could have some genuine realization of what we dismissively call “just change.” Experiencing a moment of non-ego sounds like more of a discovery because it is such an unfamiliar experience. But everyone knows things change. What is there to discover in that? Well, actually there is a great deal to discover, because we have only a conceptual understanding of change. Intellectually, of course, we all know that things change. But we never feel the significance of change in our hearts and in our guts.

It is obvious that ordinary things change. We can see this as we walk into a room and switch on the television, or leave the house to go shopping. We think that this is just how things work, and its significance doesn't hit us. But when our bodies change—especially if the change is dramatic or sudden—then this has a much greater emotional impact. An accident, or sudden discovery that we or someone close to us has a life-threatening disease, feels much more invasive. But again, we often miss its significance. Instead, we think about visiting a doctor; and as our beauty fades, we wonder about face creams. Meanwhile, the significance of aging and change still doesn't hit us.

As Buddhist practitioners, we train to see the significance of impermanence at every level: at the seemingly insignificant level of everyday things like shopping and watching television, as much as the

dramatic and emotionally compelling level of old age, sickness, and death.

Some people feel Buddhism is pessimistic. But really it is neither optimistic nor pessimistic. It is just seeing things as they are. Buddhist practice is about becoming more open, clear, and sensitive. There is nothing gloomy about that. Of course, this makes our experience clearer and sharper, and we might not like that. We may feel uncomfortable when our seemingly solid world becomes “more transparent” and “not so easily grasped at,” as Trungpa Rinpoche used to say. But it is hardly pessimistic to see that the world of our experience is potentially a much brighter, vaster place than we ever thought possible.

It reminds me of being taken to the seaside when I was very small. Looking at the sea for the first time, I burst into tears and ran away. The sea seemed so very big and I was so small. The sea scared me, but that was no reason for pessimism. I was just seeing clearly what was there before me, and I had to overcome my fear with the help of parents and friends.

THE TRUTH OF SUFFERING

The Buddha’s first truth, the truth of suffering, is not saying that everything is miserable. It’s saying that suffering, or *duhkha*, is inherent in the very nature of existence and in the basic structure of all sentient beings.

The term *duhkha* cannot be fully understood by our ordinary idea of suffering. Technically, its meaning has three aspects: the suffering of suffering, the suffering of impermanence and changes, and the suffering of the *skandhas*.

The first is fairly easy to understand. Suffering and dissatisfaction are unfair, in the most obvious sense. The

fact that we may already be suffering doesn't insure against more suffering. This is what Trungpa Rinpoche described as the "suffering of suffering." The example he gave was that having cancer is no insurance against being run down by a car.

The second, more subtle, aspect of suffering is the *duhka* of *anitya*, or the suffering of impermanence and change. Sooner or later, due to the dynamic of change, the things we grasp at and want to continue will fall apart. If we cling to them and have a vested interest in their permanence, we will be forever disappointed and will suffer for that reason.

Of course, it could be argued that if we're already suffering, any change in our circumstances would be a good thing. But this is more subtle than our ordinary notions of liking or disliking; it is the fact that the instability, the collapse, and the finishing of things is painful in itself. We wish

for stability and permanence, and this is forever denied us, irrespective of whether we are talking about pain or pleasure. It is something we want but can never get.

The third and most subtle kind of suffering is the *duhkha* of the five *skandhas*. These are the very constituents of our existence: the form of our bodies, our feelings of pleasure and pain, our sense perceptions, the contents of our minds and hearts, and our consciousness. The *skandhas*

We can at
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are not only the constituents of our personal existence, they also involve our perception of the external world and the things we hold on to in that world.

The extra subtlety here is that the *skandhas* are themselves a false creation. Since they don't correspond to what is truly there, we find ourselves emotionally involved in false projections and distortions of reality. Our seeming reality is fundamentally false, and we are absorbed into that falseness, which is painful. This is the most subtle kind of *duhkha*: the suffering of our very existence.

Taken at face value, most of us in the West would dispute the truth of suffering. Not everything in our lives and in the world is suffering. Yes, there is much suffering in the world—both mental and physical—and life is often unsatisfactory. We are not going to live forever, so there is always that uncertainty hovering over us. But on the scale of suffering, some of us seem to suffer less than others, and on occasion, we all rather enjoy ourselves.

In traditional cultures, where there is more respect for the Buddha-dharma and the teaching itself has great charisma, people tend to accept the truth of suffering, whether they understand it or not. It has a cultural meaning for them, and they can go on to train to see the truth of it. Lacking that background, we might easily think that Buddhism must be intrinsically depressing and certainly not life-affirming.

Early Western commentators, looking at the first translations of Buddhist texts, sometimes portrayed Buddhism as being negative and pessimistic. I feel there is no point in pressing on that particular nerve. The Buddha's teaching contains many things, and while the

nature of *duhkha* is fundamental, we can let it emerge gradually, if it does. Who knows? Maybe we will find that, in some deep and profound way, life is wonderful after all, even from a Buddhist perspective.

The most important thing is to experience the nature of our worlds as directly as we can. I say “worlds” because our seemingly common world is made up of all of our very different emotions, ideas, and projections. We can at least aspire to become free of notions and projections about how the world should be, and try to experience things as they are.

That simple act of aspiring to be free, to be free insofar as we can be free, is more important than we might think.

IMAGINARY BARRIERS

Trungpa Rinpoche decided that the best way to express the Buddha’s teaching was in terms of openness. The word *open* has an immediate meaning for us. We speak of people being open or closed. Being closed is associated with claustrophobia and a narrowed outlook or vision. Being open suggests we are open to many different possibilities and ways of thinking and feeling. We are open to others, allowing them to rub up against or even strike us at times, without immediately blocking them off. Openness is a way of learning about the world that enables us to relate to things properly and to act skillfully.

Trungpa Rinpoche occasionally spoke to me about the absolute of complete openness. This is something more than openness in the ordinary sense. Rinpoche suggested it was possible to experience the world free of any ego-contrived barriers whatsoever. Moreover, this state of absolute openness is completely natural. We don’t have to construct it, or indeed, deconstruct it, as we say these

days. We don't have to pull down a burning wall in our minds and hearts. Such walls exist only in our imagination. That imagination, however, is as powerful as a magical enchantment.

WAKING FROM A SPELL

The power of our false view of the world is like an enchantment. The great fourteenth-century master Longchen Rabjam spoke of it in these terms. Enchantment is a good word for it. It's as if we are under a spell, or "glamor," that causes us to see things that aren't there and fail to see things that are. This false view makes up the world as we know it.

This spell is not cast upon us by some evil magician; in a sense we create it ourselves. Through our practice of openness and awareness we become convinced that we are under an enchantment. A gradual sense of disenchantment—in the positive sense—arises. Now you might think that this would come as a great relief, but not so, unfortunately. The biggest shock often comes as the spell dissolves, and we find ourselves saying, "Where has my world gone?"

Suddenly we realize that the universe is a much vaster place than we ever imagined. We see what a parochial view we had before. We may yowl that we don't want to go there! We don't want it to be so vast and open! But it's just a sign that we need to straighten ourselves out.

Fortunately, it's not fundamentally that difficult. Many others have done so before, and so can we. This is the Buddhist view and the path of openness, which is certainly not pessimistic.

ENDPIECE



Teaching Story

Mark Nepo

An aging Hindu master grew tired of his apprentice complaining, and so, one morning, sent him for some salt. When the apprentice returned, the master instructed the unhappy man to put a handful of salt in a glass of water and then to drink it. "How does it taste?" the master asked. "Bitter," spat the apprentice.

The master chuckled and then asked the young man to take the same handful of salt and put it in the lake. The two walked in silence to the nearby lake, and once the apprentice swirled his handful of salt in the water, the old man said, "Now drink from the lake." As the water dripped down the young man's chin, the master asked, "How does it taste." "Fresh," remarked the apprentice. "Do you taste the salt?" asked the master. "No," said the young man.

At this, the master sat beside this serious young man who so reminded him of himself and took his hands, offering, "The pain of life is pure salt; no more, no less. The amount of pain in life remains the same, exactly the same. But the amount of bitterness we taste depends on the container we put the pain in. So when you are in pain, the only thing you can do is to enlarge your sense of things...Stop being a glass. Become a lake."

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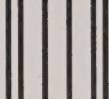
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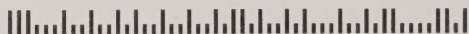
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